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Board gives racing industry \$190,000 for foal-loss research



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By **JOHN HARRELL**
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FRANKFORT — Kentucky's racing industry received more help in the effort to link Eastern tent caterpillars with Mare Reproductive Loss Syndrome, as the Agricultural Development Board awarded the industry a \$190,000 grant during yesterday's board meeting at the Capitol.

The grant, which was requested by Kentucky Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Inc. (KTOB), will help fund four research projects. The University of Kentucky will oversee the work.

Central Kentucky's breeding industry has been seeking a cause for Mare Reproductive Loss Syndrome (MRLS) since a nationwide outbreak in 2001 cost the state an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of last year's foal crop.

A long-established theory is that mares aborted their foals after ingesting the caterpillars, which were numerous in 2001 and 2002. But the industry remains puzzled over the exact relationship between the caterpillars and MRLS.

KTOB Executive Director David Switzer said the research projects were approved during a meeting Tuesday in Lexington. The meeting was attended by representatives from UK's College of Agriculture, Gluck Equine Research Center and Livestock Diagnosis Disease Center, and leading veterinary research schools Texas A&M and Cornell University.

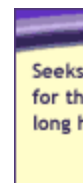
"They reviewed 20 projects and decided to give priority to four of them," Switzer said. "The focus will be to determine whether the causal agent is biological or chemical."

The agriculture board approved the request yesterday without significant discussion. The federal government and the racing industry will provide matching funds, required for any agriculture board project, Switzer said.

This is the second consecutive year the racing industry has received agriculture board assistance on MRLS. Last year, the board approved \$301,200 in funding.

Most board projects focus on diversification efforts for Kentucky tobacco farmers.

But John-Mark Hack, the board's chief executive, said it was important to recognize the contributions the equine industry makes to Kentucky, and to offer assistance when it can.



"The thoroughbred industry is not dominated by Arab sheikhs and Hollywood movie stars," Hack said. "It's dominated by small-scale producers that represent a large sector of the Kentucky agriculture economy. We have an obligation."

Overall, the board approved \$4.3 million in funding for model programs and projects during its monthly meeting yesterday.

The largest project grant was \$1.3 million to the University of Kentucky Research Foundation. The foundation will use the money to encourage diversification efforts in 19 northeastern Kentucky counties. The foundation will design leadership programs for entrepreneurial representatives in each county.

Hack described the region as the state's most tobacco-dependent, but he said it has not taken advantage of board funding at a suitable level.

"The dependence on tobacco programs in that part of the state has all but extinguished the entrepreneurial capacity or interest in diversifying," he said.

"What this program will do is not say we're from Frankfort or UK and we're here to help. It will allow residents to find the most applicable means of diversifying in the region themselves."

State representatives from the region attended yesterday's meeting, including Robin Webb, D-Grayson, who told the board that it was imperative to assist the region's farmers.

"We're losing our farms to development," Webb said. "We need to protect what we've got and give the people something to hold on to, because it feels hopeless right now."

[^^ Back to top](#)

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